

The Second of The Lincoln-Douglas Debates

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The people came by the thousands from all directions in oxcarts, buggies, by boat and trains, and on foot. They came with great excitement and interest, marching to the band music. What caused this party atmosphere? It was the day of the great second debate between Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. They were each running for the office of the United States Senate from Illinois. It was August 27, 1858, and the location for this debate was a hundred miles northwest of Chicago in the town of Freeport.

Douglas, the incumbent, was the more famous of the two candidates, but after this second debate Lincoln became a household name over night. Douglas was a strong opponent, had nothing to gain from the debates, but in order to save face, agreed to Abraham Lincoln's challenge to debate him. 'Their one major difference was the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of slavery; a very moral controversy,' wrote historian Frank Dennis. Negro slavery had existed for 250 years in America, mainly in the South. The United States was divided on this issue. Earlier in 1858, Lincoln, as the leader of the Republican Party, had given his famous speech about a "house divided against itself cannot stand." He said that he 'did not believe the Union would dissolve, but it would cease to be divided.'

Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas were as different as night and day in appearance. Douglas, known as the 'Little Giant,' was only 5'4" and Lincoln a good twelve inches taller. Douglas arrived at each debate in his private railroad car with his fashionable and social second wife, Adele. He was wealthy and dressed to perfection and

confidence and had an eloquent and aggressive manner. Accompanying him was a flatbed railroad car with a shiny, brass cannon attended by soldiers who fired the cannon whenever they arrived in a new town. Lincoln had to pay for a seat on a passenger train car like other people and so by the time he arrived, he was covered with dust. Lincoln wore a dusty black coat with sleeves too short, a wrinkled shirt and tie that never seemed to be straight. He carried an old gray shawl and bulging umbrella. His wife mostly had to stay at home to take care of their sons and make ends meet while Lincoln campaigned.

It looked like Douglas had won the first debate of seven in Ottawa. He had made many charges about Lincoln's views making him look like a total abolitionist, whereas he actually was a moderate in his views. He was practical about the long-standing issue of slavery but also did not want to extend it.

Lincoln, on that cool, drizzly day opened the second debate. He went through each question from the first debate that Douglas had charged against him. Often with great humor at his opponent's expense, Abe defended himself against the false comments. From these responses it was clear what Lincoln's stand was concerning slavery, states' rights, and constitutions for entering the Union. Then, Lincoln posed four questions to Douglas; three of these held little relevance but his second question and Douglas' response to this question actually ended up dividing the Democratic Party. They ended any hopes for Douglas being nominated for President in 1860.

This second question was "Can the people of a United States territory, in any lawful way, against the wish of any citizen of the U. S., exclude slavery from the limits prior to the formation of a state constitution?" Lincoln was advised not to ask this particular question as it would actually be to Douglas' advantage in winning the Senate

race. (Douglas did win because of the way the districts were mapped out.) Douglas' response, which became known as the 'Freeport Doctrine,' was "that any territory that wanted to eliminate slavery could do so by passing laws 'unfriendly' to that institution." This brought an excited response from the Northerners but angered the Southern Democrats. Newspaper readers all over the country were able to follow the debates because newspaper reporters recorded exactly what was said. Newspapers from all over the nation covered the debates.

Of all the debates it appears that this second one was the most important for it actually made a way for the Republicans, a party untroubled by divisions, to win the presidential election of 1860 and make Abraham Lincoln the sixteenth president. Because of the debates of 1858 the issue of slavery came before the American people in a way that they could not avoid the fact that they had to make a decision. It was time to agree with our Constitution or remain blind to the claim that "all men are created equal."

[From Paul M. Angle, *Created Equal?*; _____, *The Lincoln Reader*; Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*; Janet and Geoff Benge, *Abraham Lincoln a New Birth of Freedom*; Frank L. Dennis, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; Sterling North, *Abe Lincoln, Log Cabin to White House*; and J. G. Randall, *Mr. Lincoln*.]